

Bible Translation in the Context of Translation Studies

In the 1970s, the study of translation in the West began to turn from the linguistic model, which was dominated by the theory of “linguistic equivalence” and treated languages as closed systems, to an approach to translation as a cultural activity, for which empirical approaches to the study of translations as cultural artifacts were better suited. The field of study now known as Translation Studies (an inter-disciplinary field) is concerned not only with the study of translations, but also the activity of translation itself. Since the 1990s, specialists in Bible translation have explored translation studies as a possible “laboratory” within which to describe the translation of sacred texts. From 2007, the Nida Institute developed the Nida School of Translation Studies (located in Misano Adriatico, Italy), with the express purpose of locating the study and practice of religious text translation within the theoretical and practical framework of translation studies. Of course, it has been understood that this framework is itself under constant construction, revision, and refinement.

Beginning with the notion of translation as a cultural activity, and under the influence of the so-called “cultural turn” in the social sciences, Bible translation can now be viewed from a number of angles, all of which combine to describe it as a medium for the conveyance of ideas across cultural and linguistic lines. What used to be taken for granted – that translation produces a target text that is equivalent to its source text – has become a more problematic notion. Equivalent in what sense? Word for word (formal equivalence)? Meaning for meaning (functional or meaning-based equivalence)? Or should “equivalence” instead be

a measurement of the target text's success in performing a specific function for a specific audience? Equivalence, in one sense or another, still hangs on as a useful notion for understanding a translation's features and functions.

Perhaps the most significant development in translation studies to affect Bible translation has been the shift away from an exclusive focus on the source text in the evaluation of translations to the target text and the target audience. What does the audience need? What function is the translation to perform for them? What level of language is appropriate? What medium should the translation assume (print translation, audio translation, etc.)? All such questions begin not with the source text but with the needs of the target audience.

Through translation studies, Bible translation theorists and practitioners have come to understand translation as something far more complex than simply an operation done on a text. Translators (or translation teams) are subject to bias (theological commitments) and operate under the influence of institutions with their overarching values and expectations (ecclesiastical authority). Translation studies has demonstrated that translation is an exertion of power, and as such, it calls for constant examination of its ethical dimensions. In the case of Bible translation in developing parts of the world, who determines which languages will be selected for translation? Where a national language exists in more than one dialect, who decides which dialect will be presented in translation?

The Functionalist school developed the "Skopos theory", which views translation (from its planning to its execution) in terms of its goal or function. The "translation brief", also associated with the Functionalist school and Skopos theory, is the description of the intended goal and function of the translated text. Not only does it describe the translation project in terms of audience and purpose, but it is also a contract, more or less, designed to ensure the translator stays on course, and against which the translated outcome can be evaluated.

On the whole, the field of translation studies has introduced and developed multiple ways of doing translation research during the closing decades of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first: research that has come to shape translation training. Bible translation may be unique in terms of the value it accords to the source text in its ancient languages and in terms of institutional commitments, but its research and practice are subject to the probing questions of the larger

field of translation studies. And it stands to benefit greatly from its location within that larger field of scholarly exploration.

The “philosophy” of Bible translation sketched above also provides the broad theoretical framework for a group of exegetes *and* practitioners of Bible translation who for more than ten years have offered a program at the Pontifical Urbaniana University (PUU) to introduce students to translation of the Bible. In this particular context, translation of the Bible is considered both as an aspect of the history of the mission of the Church and as an activity which profoundly influences human culture. Based on experience gained over the past decade, the PUU is considering an expansion of its academic offer with the creation of the *Interfaith Diploma in the Theory and Practice of Bible Translation*. In such a program, an overview of the ancient history of Bible translation (from LXX, Targumim, Peshitta, Jerome/Vulgate) would create the context for understanding translation activity and purpose within the current paradigm of translation and the diversity of today’s translation audiences. The faculty of the program would reflect a variety of confessions (Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodox, Waldensians) and also represent different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Features such as these would create – we believe – a most promising academic context for the preparation of future translators who will be able to produce translations of the Bible into local languages, aiding the church in the formation of believers and to realize Christ’s desire “that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

The present issue of *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem (Between Original and Translations)* is the fruit of a collective effort of the participants in the Workshop on Contemporary Theory and Practice of Bible Translation, an interconfessional seminar which takes place at the Pontifical Urbaniana University at the beginning of every academic year. Thanks to the openness and generosity of Prof. Jerzy Brzozowski, the chief editor of *MOaP*, we are being offered a venue not only to present a sample of what we are doing at this Catholic missionary university *par excellence* to the outside world, and in this way to respond to those who may be skeptical or dubious about the ongoing need for Bible translation or the practicality of building a program of dedicated colleagues to address this.¹ The venue of *MOaP* has also afforded us the opportunity to take a stand in the ongoing

¹ Cf. J. Brzozowski, „Batalia o instrukcję przekładową *Liturgiam Authenticam*”, [in:] *Materiały Ogólnopolskiej Konferencji „Granice potęgi ducha i wiary. Polska 1920-2020”*, red. M. Lenart, Uniwersytet Opolski (in print).

discussion on translation as such and to offer to our colleagues – translators in general – several reflections on the immense subject of translation from the particular standpoint of Bible translators.

Obviously, the present issue addresses a limited set of questions about Bible translation, and it does not pretend to be exhaustive and final in the observations it makes about the nature and the modalities of translation in general. The authors of the individual contributions and the editors of the volume will be more than happy if the questions asked, the varied points of view presented, and the provisional conclusions expressed clarify some problems arising in translation and inspire further discussion.

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